

Power-dressing in ancient Greece

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It isn't just what you wear, it is *when* you wear it. *When* in the sense of keeping up with fashion. When 'power-dressing' became a fashionable phrase in the 1980s, it meant (for a woman at least) wearing suits with shoulder-pads. Wearing such a suit today would be more likely to undermine than enhance a claim to power. *When*, too, in the sense of the wearer's age: appearing as 'mutton dressed up as lamb' doesn't do much for anyone's power; nor mum or dad's clothes empower the son or daughter. But also *when* in the sense of 'on what occasion': dressing to impress at a dinner party won't make quite the same impression in the office.

When we say that someone is 'power-dressing', then, we are making a complex set of judgements – about how the clothes worn relate to what is fashionable, to what is appropriate for the occasion, and to what is appropriate for the person. We base our judgement on our experience of what others are currently wearing in comparable circumstances – and even then we won't necessarily persuade others that our verdict on any particular person's dress sense is well placed.

Making a judgement about power-dressing in a past society is much more difficult. We don't have experiences of past societies in the same way. We can only judge by comparing what people are said to wear or are shown wearing in one circumstance with what they are said to wear or are shown wearing in other circumstances. Many texts that describe or discuss dress – and we've not got anything that we would really call 'fashion journalism' – imply some sort of judgement. But pictures are different. How can we tell what contemporaries would have made of the dress sense displayed by statues or people shown on painted pottery?

The closest we can come to recreating the experience of living in the ancient Greek world is to familiarise ourselves with the full range of evidence. One text or one image on its own will not allow us to judge whether the situation it describes is typical or to gauge the social dynamics. But when we put lots of images together and 'read' them against texts we have more chance of seeing what might be happening.

Sunday best

The Athenian bowl for mixing wine reproduced below shows a procession approaching a pair of deities in a temple. Immediately to the left of the deities is a man playing the double pipes, and in front of him are various women and men dancing merrily. We are not sure who the deities are, but there is no doubt that we have here some sort of religious occasion. Most of the women involved wear the long garment known as the *chiton*, the regular dress of women in fifth-century Athenian vases. But the pipe player is not dressed in the *himation* which is the regular item of male dress. Rather he has a long and highly decorated garment. When we look at other images of men playing the pipes in what seems to be a formal setting (e.g. for the performance of a play or to accompany athletes so that they get their timing right when throwing the javelin) we discover that almost all of them wear comparable garments – with some form of all-over decorative woven pattern and with special treatment of the borders. Or else they have put on a garment which we can recognise as belonging to the dress of non-Greeks – Persians for instance. They have all dressed to impress, but done so because this is what is expected of them when they are on public display.

Smart parties

Adopting some distinctly foreign item seems to have been a way to make an impression on less public occasions too. One pot shows a departing soldier playing the Persian card by adding a fancy Persian item to his battle dress. Several early fifth-century cups made for use at parties show party-goers wearing the sort of headgear that was particularly associated with the people of Scythia – what is sometimes called a 'Scythian bonnet' (above). Others show men wearing a sort of turban known as a *sakkos*. This was a familiar item of women's dress but in men it suggested a sympathy with the Lydians who lived in Asia Minor and were notorious for their luxury. Men who wear the *sakkos* also regularly wear the long *chiton* which again was standard women's wear but a mark of eastern men. Here dressing to impress has become a signal of a particular orientation – cult clothing in a different sense.

Making a splash

Adopting an item of dress that had foreign associations was certainly not the only way of making an impression by one's appearance. Just as the degree of concealment of the body plays a large part in modern calculations of what impression dress will make, so too Greek clothing can be seen as a way of arranging the body. A particularly nice illustration of this is provided by the images on a wine-cooling vessel made shortly before the end of the sixth century B.C. at Athens (below and right). This shows a number of pairs of Athenian young men who are evidently keen to attract each other's eyes. Most of these young men wear the standard *himation*, but they wear it in various ways. While the standard way of wearing the *himation* leaves one shoulder bare, one figure has used his to cover his body completely, and even to partly cover his head. Other figures more or less nonchalantly drape their *himatia* over their shoulders leaving large parts of their bodies exposed. Two figures particularly stand out: a completely naked figure who justifies his absence of clothing by wielding the strigil that marks him as an athlete scraping himself down after exercise, and a young man whose *himation*, draped round his shoulders is shown coloured. A little colour, a change in fabric, these can entirely alter the way in which clothing offsets the body.

Impressions of power

None of the instances I have discussed so far, you may be complaining, really constitute power-dressing. For pipe players to wear the uniform for the job, or party-goers to put on fancy dress, or young men to adjust their clothes to attract and impress a boyfriend – none of this is the equivalent of the executive who manages to drive home a particularly hard bargain because those with whom they are meeting is bowled over by their particularly well-cut suit.

The best evidence that we get for the power of dress comes from the religious sanctuary. One of the features of the remarkable group of statues of young women (*korai*) excavated on the Athenian acropolis, and which had stood there as dedications in the years immediately before the Persian sack of 480 B.C., is the variety and elaboration of their dress. Although only the merest shadows of their original colours survive, it is still possible to

trace something of the patterns that were once painted upon their *chitons*, as well as to appreciate the more or less elaborate ways in which they wear the *chiton* or combine it with their *himation*.

Such statues of young women were put up in sanctuaries in many different parts of the Greek world. The inscriptions which dedicate them to the goddess in whose sanctuary they stood often refer to them as 'a very beautiful thing of delight'. Part of the anthropomorphic conceit of Greek religion involved the gods taking delight in just the same things that humans, and perhaps particularly men, take delight in. The ways in which these statues are made 'very beautiful' are similar to those deployed by young girls.

Women dressing to impress in this way could cause some problems. This emerges from a group of inscriptions which survive from various sanctuaries in the Peloponnese. These inscriptions, which range in time from the years in which the Akropolis *korai* were being dedicated through to the first century B.C., seek to regulate the clothing and jewellery which women can wear. A third-century B.C. example from the city of Dyme in Achaia, in the north of the Peloponnese, reads:

At festivals of Demeter women are to have neither gold of more than an obol weight, nor decorated clothing, nor purple, nor to wear make-up, nor to play the pipes (aulos). If anyone transgresses, the sanctuary is to be purified on the grounds that she is impious.

Talk of impiety, and the fact that some of these regulations say such things as 'no sandals unless made of felt or of skins from sacrificial animals', might suggest that offending the gods was the problem here, but cases in which the excessive gold that is worn has to be dedicated to the goddess argue against that.

The problem seems rather to be that women were taking advantage of religious festivals being one of the few occasions in which they were in the public eye. Here was a chance to impress. But competitive dressing by wives and daughters was far from socially unproblematic. Not only might members of the elite find their wives being out-shone by the daughters of men of a lesser social position, but the expense of dressing a wife or daughter competitively might be enormous. One regulation *limits* the expense on a woman's garment to 100 drachmas, a sum which itself would have been two months' wages for many people.

The power involved in this particular kind of power-dressing was too threatening to male power to be tolerated, and so the force of the law, an expression of power over which men had complete control, was employed to curb it. One writer of the Roman period claims that at Sparta they had a more general solution to female power dressing. Sparta, he writes:

allowed only prostitutes to wear flowery clothes and gold jewellery and put an end to the desire to dress up among respectable women by permitting only prostitutes to prettify themselves.

Deciding that dressing in a particular way is or is not appropriate, what counts as 'mutton dressed up as lamb' and what should be admired for its display of power, is a matter of exactly what you can persuade the community to accept. The various places in which classical Greek societies set the boundaries of what it was acceptable for women and men to wear in different contexts says something about their varying values and about how those values differ from ours.

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